

Dance

One of the steps Miro taught Hélio was the SCREW, which consists in the body jumping off the ground and twisting in the air like a screw before returning again to the ground in one hallucinating spin.

Waly Salomão, “HOMage”¹

In 1964, the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica was introduced to samba. He soon became a *passista* (solo dancer) of the Escola de Samba Estácio Primeira de Mangueira, a samba school based in the favela of Mangueira, Rio de Janeiro.

Oiticica saw in popular dance the spontaneous expression of the “interior rhythm of the collective”, a mythical art form beyond (bourgeois) intellectual ossification, an expression of the primeval body movement that dissolves social conventions, stereotypes and classes. According to Oiticica, samba corresponded to a Dionysiac manifestation of inner vital forces, rhythms, and of the human body inasmuch as these immerse the dancer in a sensualised collective zone within which the social is experienced as an organic whole. Through dance, the inner pulsation of life becomes as individual as collective. His comments on dance point to the delineation of a mythical world that precedes social division and artistic expression, a world of pre-social collective plenitude and pre-artistic raw sensation. To put it differently, dance brings about a mythical zone where art, in its vital immediacy, harmoniously merges the individual and the collective body, making possible the subjective experience of society as a whole.

Dance therefore plays an important role in signalling a reconnection to a mythicized world of primordial expression, distant from the highly intellectualised realm of modern art yet necessary for its vital re-ignition. However, as this text demonstrates, Oiticica's somewhat romanticised view on dance and vital rhythm is critically confronted by his own artistic production. The organicist conception of dance is displaced in its connection to the contemporary social reality of the favela and irrevocably shattered by the inter-subjective zone brought about by the spectator's participation.

1. In *Hélio Oiticica* exh. cat. (Galerie nationale jeu du Paume, Paris; Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro; Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 1992), p. 240. Translation modified.

Environmental Art

From 1964 to 1972, Oiticica produced a series of works to be carried, worn or inhabited. He called them *Parangolés*². Apart from the first three pieces — a banner, a flag and a tent — the *Parangolés* are capes with several layers composed of different materials (fabrics, meshes) to be worn by the spectator. Although designed to be worn, these capes are not costumes but visual “structures” constructed by means of assembling different materials/layers. Significantly, they form part of a body of work that mark a crucial turn in the artist's career, from the neoconcrete spatialisation of colour to the opening of the art object to questions regarding Brazilian popular urban culture (industrial and vernacular), material diversity and the status of spectatorship. Along with the *Nuclei* (1960-63) — a series of three-dimensional pieces consisting of a group of monochromatic paintings hung from the gallery ceiling according to a prefigured orthogonal structure — the *Penetrables* (1961-79) — small, walk-in cabin-like spaces — and the *Bólides* (1963-69) — *manipulable* plywood cuboid boxes or plastic glass and containers, holding different materials (pigments, shells, mesh) —, the *Parangolés* convey a shift towards what Oiticica termed environmental art.

Oiticica's environmental program advanced through the interconnection of three artistic approaches. First, the art object forges a situation that elicits the spectator's participation. Contrary to the passive and contemplative experience of the (modernistic) work of art, the spectator is here incited to manipulate (*Bólides*) or actively participate in the completion of the artwork (*Parangolés*). The beholder becomes a manipulator, a performer or an active contributor to the making of the artwork as it exhorts tactile exploration and playful usage. Second, through the intricate assemblage of disparate materials, the art object becomes a multi-sensorial structure for synesthetic experience, tapping into different levels of socio-historical signification. For the production of his 'environmental' pieces, Oiticica's introduced a vast array of materials of very different provenances, from found objects to prefabricated materials. Such heterogeneous constructions operate both on a material-sensorial and socio-cultural level. On the one hand, the Brazilian artist combined 'hard' materials such as wood and glass as a means to partition space and construct volume with 'soft' materials such as fabric, shells and pigments, creating a dynamic stage for haptic experiences. Oiticica became a *bricoleur*. On the other hand, he deliberately incorporated 'poor' or 'precarious' materials in constructions that seem improvised and makeshift, opening the path for what we may call the peripheral aesthetics of human resourcefulness (“on adversity we thrive”), so important in shaping his major installations, *Tropicália* (1967) and *Eden* (1969). Significantly, the material pauperization and precarization of his work aligned with an increased interest

2. The word 'parangolé' is part of Rio de Janeiro's slang. It has different meanings that refer to the streetwise way of life of the *carioca* (a Rio de Janeiro born citizen).

3. Briefly, the neoconcrete movement emerged as a response to the deadlock reached in late 1950s by Brazilian constructivism (concrete art). Through the theoretical orientation of the poet and art critic Ferreira Gullar, neoconcrete artists engaged in the persistent, even if multifarious, critique of the “exacerbated rationalism” of concretism which, according to the neoconcrete standpoint, had reduced geometric abstraction to a technical expression of scientific knowledge (particularly Gestalt psychology), objective positivism and modern mechanicism. In contrast, neoconcrete artists attempted to elaborate a new position regarding the history of Brazilian geometric abstraction. This was a position that proposed a renewed and autonomous relationship between art and subjective perception, expression and intuition (without abdicating the geometric rigour and objectivity of concrete art). Although short lived (1959-61), and somewhat parochial (the neoconcrete movement resulted from the reaction of a group of artists from Rio de Janeiro to São Paulo's concrete art scene), the neoconcrete movement would define much of the avant-garde art produced in Brazil in the 1960s. The writings of Gullar, particularly the “Neoconcrete Manifesto” and “Theory of the Non-object”, and the art work of Oiticica and Lygia Clark (among others) would prove pivotal in framing the conceptual debates and artistic practices of the following years. Significantly, as Ronaldo Brito asserts, the neoconcrete art movement signals the historical closure of Brazilian constructivism and the opening of a new set of parameters for Brazilian art (see Aracy Amaral, *Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro na Arte. (1950-62)*. Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro; São Paulo: Secretaria da Cultura, Ciência e Tecnologia do Estado de São Paulo, Pinacoteca do Estado, 1977; R. Brito, *Neoconcretismo: Vértice e Ruptura do Projecto Construtivo Brasileiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Marcos Marcondes, 1975).

4. The beginning of Oiticica's artistic trajectory is part of the history of Brazilian constructivism, more specifically the history of concrete and neoconcrete art. This trajectory starts with Oiticica's involvement with the Rio de Janeiro avant-garde cultural scene associated with the *Grupo Frente*, which included the artists Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape and the influential art critics Ferreira Gullar and Mário Pedrosa. In the mid-1950s, Oiticica participated in several exhibitions of *Grupo Frente* and in the *1st Exhibition of Concrete Art*. Like other concrete art painters, he explored the formal problems then being addressed by contemporary, i.e. concrete, constructivism: the pictorial structure of the painting's surface, notions of repetition and seriality, figure-background relations, and the formal functions of colour. In the late 1950s, Oiticica begins to develop an individual artistic path, producing a group of paintings titled *Secos* [Dry] (1956-57) and *Metaesquemas* [Metaschemes] (1957-58), in which his investigations on structure and colour and formal seriality gain consistence. As he would retrospectively acknowledge, this body of work inaugurated a line of enquiry which would lead to the production of the three-dimensional “environmental” art in the following decade. In 1959-60, during the formation of the neoconcrete art

in vernacular and popular aspects of Brazilian urban culture and society, such as samba and the urban space of the favela. Lastly, Oiticica never fully abandoned the constructivist (geometric-abstract) framework of concrete and neoconcrete art³. He explored new sensorial and material possibilities through continuing his systematic study of the three-dimensional expansion of colour. The ludic and sensuous aspects of the pieces produced during the 1960s are arranged according to the framework of reference provided by the highly architectural conception of space and structural notion of colour developed during a formative period in the late 1950s and early 1960s⁴.

These three aspects — the participation of the spectator, sensory-material heterogeneity, and the structural spatialisation of colour — shaped the *Parangolé* series as well as the rest of the work produced that decade. However, the capes establish a singular direct link with dance. More specifically, the usage of soft materials as a way to create a wearable shelter composed of several layers/surfaces, in a certain sense re-actualising painting's classic relation between draperies and compositional planes, and the presentation of the capes as art pieces to be worn and danced with, connect the *Parangolés* to performative movement, to popular dance, and samba in particular.

In light of Oiticica's notes on dance, we may consider the *Parangolés* as a means of negotiating between the 'warmth' of vital movement and the 'coldness' of modern visual arts, opening the latter to the primordial zone of sensuous expression enacted by the former. To put it differently: the capes operate as art mediators between the pre-artistic world of spontaneous rhythm and the highly intellectualised world of contemporary art. However, this mediation is far from unproblematic as it relies on the tensional relationship between the formal aesthetic structure and mythical human vitality. To borrow Waly Salomão's words, Oiticica's work stems from the “pendulous tension transgression/constructivism”. The environmental program emerges from within the midst of such antagonism.

The discovery of what I call *Parangolé* signals the crucial point and defines a specific position within the theoretical position of all my experiments with color-structure in space, especially with regards to a new definition of what may be, in those same experiments, the “plastic object”, that is, the work. It is not the case — as the name *Parangolé*, taken from folklore slang, might lead one to suppose — of implying a fusion of folklore with my experiments, or any identification of that kind, transposed or otherwise, completely superficial and useless (...) In this search for an objective foundation, for a new space and time in the work in environmental space, this constructive sense of the *Parangolé* aspires to an “environmental art” par excellence (...) The

spectator's participation is, once again, characteristic of what exists today generally in art: a search for “environmental totalities” that are created and explored throughout all their orders, from the infinitely small to the architectural, urban space, etc. (...) The “finding” of *Parangolé* elements in the landscape of the urban or rural world is also part of “establishing perceptive-structural relations” between what grows in the structural grid of the *Parangolé* (representing here the general character of colour-structure in the environmental space), and what is “found” in the spatial environmental world. In the architecture of the “favela”, for example, a *Parangolé* character is implicit, such is the structural organicity of its constituent elements, alongside the internal circulation and external dismemberment of these constructions; there are no abrupt transitions from “room” to “living-room” or “kitchen”, only the essential that defines each part connecting to the other in continuity (...) All these matters remain for a critical theorization, including a return, through the concept of the *Parangolé*, to that mythical primordial structure of art, which, of course, always existed and defined to a greater or lesser extent (...) There is a “will for a new myth”, brought about by these art elements; they interfere with the spectator's behaviour.⁵

Therefore, the articulation of dance with fine art took place within the framework provided by the environmental program. However, as the above passage suggests, the relationship between the operational realm of the environmental project and the mystical sphere of the “primordial structure of art” remains unresolved. On the one hand, the total experience of the artwork was accomplished through the interpenetration of the abstract-geometric framework and certain aesthetic dimensions of the socio-cultural Brazilian reality of that time. As the citation shows, Oiticica sought to incorporate facets of Brazilian life into his work, bringing it closer to specific contemporary aspects of Brazil's relentless process of modernisation⁶. In this sense, the environmental program entailed a process of reconnecting artwork to a precise social field, operating within the cultural parameters stemming from a defined socio-historical territory. On the other hand, the trans-historical and archetypical notion of primordial rhythm (dance) remains a crucial facet regarding the political remit of artwork, for the idealised totalisation of the collective body is accomplished through a “return” to a mythical world of spontaneous experience. Oiticica refers to two different kinds of experiential totalities or lived experiences (*vivências*) whose interrelation is the very means through which the mythical world of primeval rhythm and the topological socio-political reality of urban Brazil violently displace each other. Oiticica saw the stages for this tensional relationship in the “spectator's behaviour”.

group, the three-dimensional spatialisation of colour takes on the architectural dimension characteristic of his mature work. In 1959, Oiticica initiates the production of a series of paintings, which are monochromes deriving from tonal variations of one indexed “nuclear” colour (white, yellow or red) while exploring the limits of the frame's bi-dimensionality. While reducing painting to a flat surface, Oiticica released the paintings from the wall, creating three-dimensional constructions that establish a spatio-temporal relationship with the surrounding environment. These three-dimensional structures result in the production of the first *Nucleus* in 1960. As experiments in the spatialisation of colour, the *Nuclei* bring about a dynamic interrelationship between the experiential (spatial and temporal) trajectory of the viewer, the rhythmic arrangement of colour staged by the orthogonal construction, and the involving space of the gallery. They represent, in this regard, Oiticica's contribution to the neoconcrete response to the impasses pertaining to Brazilian geometric abstraction. However, as Oiticica realises, they opened a set of possibilities that went beyond the neoconcrete framework and the constructivist tradition. To a certain extent, the *Nuclei* signalled the closure of the constructivist project and the forging of the environmental program that later culminates in the *Tropicália* (1967) and *Eden* (1969) installations of the late 1960s.

5. Fundamental Bases for the Definition of “Parangolé” in *Hélio Oiticica*, p. 85-88. Translation modified.

6. Oiticica found in the informal and interstitial spaces brought about by the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation of the country (the social spaces of the ‘street’ and the favela) a productive source for his work. Socially, Oiticica tapped into the way of life of the underclasses (the petty criminal, the outcast, and the poor) while, culturally paying particular attention to the dimensions of urban vernacular culture that conveyed notions of precarity, improvisation and resourcefulness.

Participation

The *Parangolés* are meant to be danced in or with (or inhabited) to the sound of samba music. According to Oiticica, the act of wearing the cape corresponded to a “bodily-expressive transmutation” of the wearer, the participator, into a new subjective position that only the art piece brings forward. The wearer becomes a participator who becomes a dancer. Specifically, Oiticica points to a crucial difference between wearing and watching:

“The “wearing”, in its greater and total sense, counterpoints the “watching”, a secondary feeling, thus closing the “wearing-watching” cycle (...) Wearing, by itself already constitutes a living experience of the work since, by unfolding it and having his/her own body as the central nucleus, the spectator experiences, as it were, the spatial transmutation which takes place there (...) Watching already leads the participator towards the objective spatio-temporal plane of the work, while in the other [state of wearing], this plane is dominated by the subjective-experiential; therein lies a completion of the initial experience of wearing”⁷

In this text, by pointing out the objective and subjective position of the wearer (dancer) and the watcher, Oiticica makes reference to the “environmental structure” of the *Parangolé* in terms of “participator-work”: the spectator experiences the work, as it were, either from within, 'inside' the performative act of completion, or outside that spatio-temporal zone, as a passive spectator that observes an external event. As an environmental piece, the cape puts into motion a “cycle” (wearing-watching) that is opened by these two oppositional experiential positions and completed by ways of the continuous interchange between subjective participation and objective witnessing. Crucially, Oiticica considered the series of stoppages and restarts of movement necessary for the changing between dancers and viewers, an important dimension of such cycle.

In the “Notes”, the artist suggested that the total (environmental) experience of the *Parangolé* is attained through the equivocal position of the dancer-spectator, that is, through the experience of a participator that is a performer for others and simultaneously a spectator of the movement of other performers (within a group of participators-spectators). However, the closure of the cycle wearing-watching does not amount to a definitive completion of the artwork, as if one were the adequate supplement of the other; as if the total experience of the *Parangolé* was accomplished through the necessary and smooth transition from the position of passive spectator to active participator.

7. “Notes on the Parangolé” in *Hélio Oiticica*, pp 93, 96. Translation modified.

What sustains the 'environmental totality' of the capes is the antagonism arising from watching and wearing, contemplation and action, and the very irreconcilability of these two subjective positions. The participator-spectator is torn between two different experiential situations, occupying the complicated position of mediation between two divergent zones of subjectivity. As such, the *Parangolé* does not represent an attempt to stage within the artwork the critique of the passive experience of art, so important for participatory art, in terms of active participation as 'primary feeling' vis-à-vis secondary inactive observation. Environmental totality implies that participation is always participation for the observation of a spectator that is captured by a performative event that demands external, but also 'internal', observation. Through the transformative act of wearing, the spectator is transmuted into the witness of an event as dependent on the dancer as on the viewer. Thus, the wearing deploys the wearing-watching dichotomy. In this case, the watcher is caught in a situation where objective observation is fundamental, as if the act of watching were also the object of someone's external observation. The contemplation of the dance movement, qua work of art, is the means through which the observer becomes the watcher-watched, a witness conscious of its witnessing. Contrasting with the position of the spectator, Oiticica referred to the violence related to the wearing of the cape, assailing the individual's pre-established way of "being in the world". The transmutation related to the immersion in the mythical world of dance (wearing) involves the radical shattering of given subjective positions, rather than the spontaneous release of vital sensuous expression unblemished by violence. Following Oiticica's notes on dance, this violence seems linked to the dissolution of the subject's mode of being in a social world structured by social conventions, class division and intellectual abstraction. It is a violence that de-naturalizes the subject's 'natural' place in society. Oiticica attempts to reconnect the mythical conflation of individual and collective vital forces to the concrete urban social underworld that resulted from the accelerated process of modernization of Brazil. The *Parangolés*, being hybrid constructions that operate between makeshift shelters and capes to dance with, powerfully conjure this urban reality. However, Oiticica's comments on the *Parangolé* point to a direction very different from any configuration of a harmonious social totality. As he pointed out, the *Parangolé* is first and foremost a visual work of art that operates within an inter-subjective perceptive field composed of dancers and observers. Here, dance is a primary, and subjective, experience of the artwork insofar as the dancer becomes part of the visual art object (to be perceived by others). The seeming empowerment of the spectator, who, by wearing and dancing becomes an active participator in the making of the art object, is critically dislodged for participation is primarily manifested in terms of action pertaining to the completion of the artwork, that is, as an aesthetic component of the visual

piece. In this sense, the cape is the perpetrator of a violation that is not connected to primordial vital movement, but to the objectification of the dancer. Wearing marks precisely the tension emerging between acting and performing (acting for a spectator that, in turn, objectifies his/her own observation). From this point of view, the collective dimension of the *Parangolé* is brought forward both through the connection and disjunction of seeing and being seen, and doing and seeing.

Modern Primitivism

If there is a reconciliatory and utopian facet to the *Parangolé*, it is found in the reciprocal overlapping of the mythical expression of life and the material world of those formally excluded from — but fully socially and economically part of — modern Brazil. Here, the urban vernacular bears the mark of a socio-cultural domain that is as primitive (outside the formal and institutional framework of the nation-state) in as much as it is modern (intrinsic to the process of the nation's modernisation). Rhythmic myth, that pre-social zone where society can be experienced as a whole, was actualised in the concrete social life of the informal urban world, the negative reality of the idealised image of the modern nation. According to Oiticica, this modern primitive world — a world produced by the state's developmentalist surge as its negative over-spillage — engendered the conditions for the reactivation of the primordial pulsation of collective life. However, as the notion of participation indicates, the immediacy of the connection between urban vernacular culture and primeval performative movement remains far from unproblematic for it is forged within the social arena of inter-subjective processes of objectification and subjectification. In this regard, the capes stage the encounter between two different but correlated zones of social positioning: the Brazilian modern primitivism of the favela and the contradictory process of objectification of the subject (dancer) and subjectification of the object (work). 'Environmental totality' is the process through which the socially located 'pre-social' mythical sphere of dance and *bricolage* is brought about by a visual art object and sustained through an equivocal subjective position (wearing-watching) that functions as a kind of primeval stage necessarily conditioned by today's forms of subject formation.

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